

# “They’ve killed the dogs!”: Land, literature and canines in contemporary Zimbabwe

Dan Wylie

Dan Wylie lectures in literary studies at Rhodes University, Grahamstown.  
Email: D.Wylie@ru.ac.za

## “They’ve killed the dogs!”: Land, literature and canines in contemporary Zimbabwe

This article explores the positioning of the dog in representations of farm takeovers in Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2017. It highlights the localised embeddedness of animal lives within social processes at a specific juncture of postcolonial history. The article focuses particularly on this moment marked by abrupt reversals of power, geographical distributions of people and animals, and the erasure of many physical and psychological borderlines. It focuses particularly on two novels, Graham Lang’s *Place of Birth* (2006) and Ian Holding’s *Unfeeling* (2005). It examines ways in which dogs feature as both physical presences and as psychological refractors for human responses to the violent invasions depicted in these novels. Animals of all kinds have been largely neglected in studies of the land-appropriation process, and the article gestures towards the fruitful combination of animal studies and an historically-situated, multispecies, postcolonial ecocriticism. **Keywords:** dogs; fiction; Graham Lang; Ian Holding; Zimbabwe land reform.

The cover photo of Ian Holding’s 2005 novel of Zimbabwe’s farmlands, *Unfeeling*, centralises a dog—one of those undefinable ‘African’ types standing between the anonymous bare legs of some dusty African children. This is a slightly mystifying choice: although dogs play a significant role in the novel (my title is a quotation from it), they are hardly central. The African dogs are even less central, and the narrative focalisers are all white farmers and their family members. Yet clearly this image was adjudged to have some emotive pull on putative buyers of the book.

This article explores the positioning of the dog in selected narratives of the post-2000 Zimbabwean land redistribution process.<sup>1</sup> The aim is not to contribute to theorising human-canine relations more broadly, but to highlight the localised embeddedness of animal lives within social processes at a specific juncture of postcolonial history. It is a moment marked by abrupt reversals of power, geo-

graphical redistributions of people and animals, and the erasure of many physical and psychological borderlines. A trend towards a "politicised ecocriticism" (Slovic) of postcolonial literature has yet to explore fully the role and significance of non-human actors, whether domesticated or wild; I know of none in the Zimbabwean context (but see Louw; Dande and Swart in this volume). An approach that combines animal studies with postcolonial ecocriticism would entail delineating canine subjectivities within what Neel Ahuja terms "multispecies ecologies of representation", through which one can "trace the ways in which the historically situated zones of contact between peoples and nonhuman species create the conditions of possibility for semiotic activities in defined fields of social power" (59). This also involves shifting the focus from social justice for humans alone towards recognition and justice for all inhabitants of a multispecies environment. The move is, importantly, not to omit or erase issues of race or multiculturalism, which play obvious roles in the fictions reviewed here (see Cordiero-Rodrigues and Mitchell), but to encompass them within a still wider view. Postcolonial studies has evinced "a tendency to isolate the humans at the centre of its analysis from the non-human universe that surrounds them" (Richard Watts, qtd. in Miller 4). On the other hand, as Philip Armstrong worries, postcolonial animal studies threatens to be equally exclusionary and to risk "trivialising the suffering of human beings under colonialism"—or, in this case, the post-colony (Armstrong 413). The tension, John Miller argues, may be, if not overcome, at least reconfigured by "exploring the specific historical interdependencies of human, animal and ecological concerns" (Miller 17). I hope here to contribute to such an awareness.

Animals of many kinds—cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys, horses, cats and dogs, wildlife—have been crucial elements and unavoidable presences in most, if not all, instances of Zimbabwe's land-appropriations. They have been varyingly cultivated, exchanged, stolen, sold, deliberately tortured, utilised, killed, hunted, poached, eaten, treasured and rescued. Dogs in particular appear as both companions and enemies, as emotional props and utilitarian servants, as carriers of cultural belonging and of ethical dispositions. Above all, they appear as victims. In short, human and animal lives are inextricably entangled, human behaviours are frequently directed or influenced by active animal presences, and animals always carry emotional and cultural freights of meaning that ought to be attracting more attention. Hence I contextualise my focus on dogs a) within a brief overview of animals in the extant academic land-appropriation literature; b) as nested within, or intersecting with, wider animal presences; and c) as complex cultural signifiers and actors within the specific postcolonial setting of the Zimbabwean farm in the early 2000s.

Socio-political studies of the land-appropriation proliferate, albeit with a certain provisionality since the process, seventeen years after its launch, is still not over. The situation has also become more complex, as not only white farm-

occupants have been affected, and numerous ad hoc, unpredictable arrangements have been made by sundry participants. Some of the major published studies are antipathetic, if not towards the necessity for land reform itself, at least towards the manner of its implementation—its initial chaos and confusion, belatedly bureaucratised by the state, its displacements and murders. Some are critical of the international media's neo-colonial spotlighting of white farmer deaths and under-reporting of the numerically much greater displacement and impoverishment of former black farm workers. Other studies have defended the land-appropriation as more beneficial to the country than the media asserted. One such is Ian Scoones et al's *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and realities* (2010), which has in turn been critiqued for a covert alignment with the governing ZANU-PF party, and a dubious extrapolation of its narrow, Masvingo-based case study to the country as a whole. While personal testimonies witness to the pervasive presence and importance of cattle in settlers' lives, the researchers' questioning techniques were never designed to elicit lived responses to animals, whose subjective reality is obscured behind the generalisations of production figures. Dogs feature not at all. Joseph Hanlon, Manjengwa and Smart's *Zimbabwe Takes Back its Land* (2013) has been critiqued for historical thinness, ideological bias and resultant misuse of statistics. Animals of all kinds—even the ubiquitous livestock—scarcely feature in Hanlon's account, and violence against animals and humans alike is radically underplayed. Only two passing mentions of dogs are made, though they are inadvertently suggestive and contrastive. The first relates how an African forcibly removed from his land in 1958 lamented that he "could not take [his] little dog" (Hanlon 2); the second observes a relaxed white farmer with "his dog curled up beside him" (149). Dogs are iconic of shared affective (dis)possession and comfort. Both Scoones and Hanlon validly assert the need to exhume the experiences of those generally considered voiceless, to write a 'history from below' extolling the virtues of the ordinary Zimbabwean. However, at no point does either treat animals as anything but quantifiable economic resources. Even this proved difficult: Scoones notes that official statistics-gathering declined in thoroughness and accuracy, and that there was high differentiation between households and districts. He gives some figures for cattle distribution in Masvingo province, but not for the donkeys, goats and sheep also involved (118–23). Indications are, at least, that animals far outnumbered humans throughout the process. More recent studies, such as Andrew Hartnack's *Ordered Estates* (2016), have given further nuance and texture to household-level dynamics, in his case those of women involved in farm-welfare enterprises—but his excellent study is again exclusively anthropocentric.

A useful term here is Carol Adams's "absent referent": in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams notes the occlusion of the living, individual and sentient animal behind the rhetorical and actual packaging of desensitised and desensitising *meat*

(Adams 53). She parallels this with the occlusion of women, her overall purpose being both feminist and animals-rightist. I do not have space here to expand on the sexuality/meat-eating nexus which is Adams' own focus, though it is present in these novels; but I do want to extend her insight into the ways in which even brief references and metaphors can at once reveal and mask underlying systems of oppression and power, ways in which we are "shaped by and participants in the structures of the absent referent" (17). Briefly, dogs are depicted, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, as metonymic of the animal-based economies of colonial farming practices and ownership (the very basis of land-reappropriation) which themselves are left unspoken or covertly valued as self-evidently 'right'. Moreover, often the animal itself is taken for granted, apparently requiring or deserving no overt depiction or comment; or it is implicitly relegated to a rung of lesser importance on the ladder of human concerns, and therefore accorded less textual space. This is despite the fact that in daily life those same animals might be the focus of considerable, even unique emotional attachment and complex cultural meaning. A visual example is a photograph from Christina Lamb's novelised account of one family caught up in the appropriations, *House of Stone* (2006). The photograph depicts "The Hough family behind their locked gate"; just visible behind one of the bars in the foreground is a black dog (Lamb 229). The dog is never mentioned in the text. So even where the embodied animal presence is included, its social importance is not commented upon; in a sense, then, its *meaning* is the absent referent.

Of all the non-fiction texts produced on the land-appropriations, only one or two centralise animals: Cathy Buckle's *Innocent Victims* (2004) recounts SPCA national inspector Meryl Harrison's often harrowing and courageous rescues of animals hurt, taken captive or abandoned in the course of farm occupations. One might demur from Buckle's diction of "mobs", "savage brutality" and so on: the text veers uncomfortably close to a cultural-racial dichotomy in which Africans are mindlessly cruel, and the white farmers almost uniformly compassionate. Nevertheless, the several hundred instances Buckle relates of dogs beaten to death, cats shot, horses and donkeys hamstrung, cows left to starve, and so on, are stomach-turning. At the same time, the motives, back-stories and emotions of the invaders are left unexplored and obscure. Surely, however, these animals served as symbolic ciphers or bodily surrogates for the farmers who were being dispossessed—relatively defenceless vectors for dammed-up angers, frustrations and fears.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the centrality of animals in *Innocent Victims*, their presence is tangential in Buckle's better-known texts, *African Tears* (2001) and *Beyond Tears* (2002). In a way, this apparent split echoes tensions within scholarship of the 'postcolonial animal' mentioned earlier. Buckle's narratives are centred on the invasion of her own farm, but they also document how she campaigned

tirelessly to publicise the experiences of other white and black farmers under attack from invaders, assiduously listing government legislations, failures to act or heed court orders, and harassment of opposition movements. Though hints that animals—especially dogs in white farmer households—are present in almost every single take-over scenario, their presence is often just that—a hint. Nevertheless, some passages in Buckle's accounts are valuable here for their gestures towards both how animal and human lives are intertwined, and at how dogs' lives intersect with other animal presences within the politically-charged environment.

The first such passage is in fact the very opening paragraph of *African Tears* (ix), written not by Buckle but by Trevor Ncube, independent newspaper editor and vocal critic of President Robert Mugabe:

I will never be able to erase from my mind the BBC Television images of a farm going up in flames, farm workers running for dear life with axe and knobkerrie wielding ZANU-PF youths in hot pursuit on a farm in Domboshawa near Harare. Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched the footage of the youths torching the farm workers' dwellings and meagre possessions. One of them descended on a dog in its kennel with bricks, stones and sticks killing it mercilessly.

It is unclear whether the dog belongs to one of the workers or to the unidentified farm owner. Ncube's compact account focuses on the fate of the already relatively impoverished Zimbabwean workers, the context of international media coverage, the personalised emotional response, the implicit critique of government involvement in unbridled mob behaviour—but settles on the slaughter of a cornered and defenceless individual dog as exemplary of the "merciless" quality of this particular attack.

As for Buckle's own life, the dogs are clearly omnipresent, if only sporadically mentioned, both as guards—not only against people, but also cobras (*African Tears* 47)—and as treasured companions, especially for her young son Rich, who plays with them constantly (68). She worries desperately about their fate when their eviction becomes imminent (206). The dogs have personality, are of recognised breeds—one is a "hair-brained [sic] white Boxer" (206), another a Labrador—unlike the anonymous dogs owned by invaders, which are habitually described as "scrawny" (see Lang 38). The dogs also intersect with the lives of other animals on the farm; they are, for example, "outraged" at the presence in the kitchen of a hand-reared lamb, one farm animal which was permitted to breach the conventional boundary between outside livestock and household pets (*African Tears* 218). Some of the slaughtered sheep meat would also be fed to the dogs. Throughout these texts, tensions are evident between the domestic and the farmed, between emotional attachment to individuals and the machineries of the abattoir: the entire enterprise is predicated on the slaughter of animals for food. Throughout the texts under scrutiny here meat-eating receives regular but uncritical and offhand mention. Yet the killing of those same animals by the farm

invaders is portrayed as thoroughly indecent, a view at times inflected by subdued racism.

Dog ownership was of course not confined to the white farmers, and canine lives also intersected with those of wild animals. Wild creatures that lived on Buckle's farm also soon became victims of 'liberating' land-appropriation:

Next was a group of youngsters who came through the fields nearest the house, the last fields left where the cattle and sheep could graze, the only fields that had not yet been liberated. There were six young men in a group and with them a pack of five hunting dogs. They were out on a hunt to roust out the last duiker, hares or guinea fowl that had escaped previous raids. [...] They shouted and whistled to one another and their dogs; cattle scattered, calves bellowing as they were separated from their mothers. The men laughed at the chaos their dogs were creating. [...] (*African Tears* 179)

This use of dogs—as traditional hunters but now also as weapons of invasion—would be echoed elsewhere, as in this report about the Save Conservancy, quoted by Buckle:

Using snares, nets or hunting dogs, 'war veterans', most of them identified though no arrests were made, killed an estimated 81 different types of wildlife valued at \$457,000. This does not include a potential daily rate paid by foreign clients and potential taxidermy fees, also paid in foreign currency [...] (154)

This takes us in a slightly different direction: the particular parameters and global financial dynamics as determining the kinds of conservation applied here—essentially varieties of so-called 'fortress conservation', which has of late come under increasing critique. William Wolmer characterises this nexus as a "way in which romantic and ecocentric discourses somewhat surprisingly articulate with an explicitly neoliberal free trade agenda" (Wolmer 174). In the event, the financial and national-benefit defensive arguments deployed by post-independence white landowners made not the least impression on land-invaders, whose paradigms were self-evidently of a different order altogether. Dogs were not immune to the clash between these paradigms: they are enmeshed in both natural and agriculturally-modified ecosystems, along with conflicting regimes of ownership and authority.

All the aspects touched on here reappear in the fictions discussed below. Fiction reveals precisely those animal individualities and social meanings excluded from most non-fiction studies. I confine myself to 'white' fictions of the land-appropriations, for one main reason: there are almost no 'black' fictions. I know of only one, a very short but rather fine collection of interlinked vignettes: *The Trek and Other Stories* (2009) by Lawrence Hoba explores the experiences of the 'new settlers'. It portrays a process just as fraught, chaotic and dangerous for the latter as it appeared to the white farmers who were displaced. Though dogs often accompanied the settlements, Hoba mentions them not at all. I also confine myself

to two prominent and substantial novels, those by Graham Lang and Ian Holding, both written from the perspective of displaced white farmers, and featuring strong canine presences. But a few other preceding narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, are worth mentioning.

Strong continuities exist between the situation portrayed in the post-2000 period and that of the 1970s. The farmers experienced parallels in their fears and tactical defences between the 1970s war and the 2000s land invasions; and the Mugabe government and 'war veterans' recycled the terminologies of their earlier liberation discourse, characterising land-appropriation as the Third Chimurenga. Laurens van der Post anticipated the process in his sequential novels *A Story Like the Wind* (1972) and *A Far-Off Place* (1974), in which the parents of the protagonist François are murdered on their southern Rhodesian farm, and hordes of Communist-trained armies chase François and his little party across the sub-continent. The fleeing party is led by Khabbo, a 'Bushman' who had been found trapped by François' Rhodesian ridgeback Hintza, and the dog continues to play a substantial role throughout the two narratives. Lauren Liebenberg's novel *The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam* (2008), is also set in the 1970s war, narrated by another youth emerging into maturity. *Voluptuous Delights* features a so-called *khaya* dog—more commonly known to whites at the time as kaffir-dogs, distinguished by their lack of distinctive breed characteristics and thus deemed inferior to the 'European' pedigreed dogs. Liebenberg's mutt, named Moosejaw, is rescued by chance and integrated into the white protagonist's family, and comes to play a pivotal role in the plot in the novel's second half. Moosejaw, in a sense, thus transgresses the race/class/culture divide—a notion I will revisit later.

*Voluptuous Delights* bears strong resemblances to non-fiction memoirs of growing up into war-time Rhodesia such as Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2002) and Lauren St John's *Rainbow's End* (2007). Both these texts feature dogs repeatedly but not centrally; as St John notes in passing, there were probably very few farms that did not possess, as part of their "paper-thin defences", a "pack of useless but vocal dogs" (St John 126). Fuller's memoir takes the family through the war years, into the post-independence loss of their farm Rohandi, and onto Devuli Ranch in the Lowveld. Dogs accompany the growing Alexandra all the way, though the only dog casualty, the obligatory Rhodesian ridgeback, is panga'd not by farm invaders but by (her mother alleges) the ranch managers because she has accused them of illegally leopard-hunting on the reserve (Fuller 208). The Fullers' compassion for the dog, otherwise only a desultory presence, sparks through here.

Attitudes of farmers towards their own dogs were doubtless variable, ranging from loving companionship to a careless utilitarianism approaching cruelty. Some instances may be gleaned from David Caute's acerbic account of "the death of white Rhodesia", *Under the Skin* (1983). He sardonically describes one white estate

agent being "followed around by a couple of large dogs whom he periodically kicks in a practiced manner much appreciated by large dogs as a sign of mastery and affection" (114). Doubtless Caute intends this as a sidelight on the owner's 'liberal' but patronising racism; just as his characterisation of one of Lady Wilson's dogs as "neurotic" (215) seems intended to reflect on white Rhodesians' paranoias generally. He elsewhere depicts a then common 'Beware of the Dog' sign, attached to gate or fence, "accompanied by a picture of a growling bulldog hot on the heels of a very black Sambo" (124). At one farm Caute visits, "Two large dogs bound across the lawn and rear up, their paws gripping the wire, aggression spurting from their throats, hot of tongue and terrible of jaw. Sasha Randall follows them at a leisurely pace, wearing jeans and chewing gum. 'It's all right,' she says, 'you're white'" (228). Little wonder such 'racist' dogs were targeted, whether in 1978 or 2008. Yet amongst the many dozens of farm attacks and murders enumerated by Caute, the fate of the ubiquitous dogs is altogether absent.

To come to the 2000s situation, John Eppel's *Absent: The English Teacher* (2009) is a characteristic Eppel satire, albeit rather uncharacteristically sombre in its dénouement; it relates how a white English teacher's suburban Bulawayo home is 're-appropriated' by a government official—a very fat woman named Beauticious—in an urban parallel to the rural land-seizures:

Quick to learn from the new farmers, those patriotic sons of the soil who were in the process of expediting the mother of all agricultural seasons, Beauticious gave George forty-eight hours to move from his house (now hers) to his servant's quarters (now hers). He was permitted to take only his clothes and his toothbrush. His three pets [a dog, a cat, and a hen] would become common property, as long as George cared for them in his free time, between the hours of 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. and Sundays, and as long as they didn't bother Beauticious' two pets: two killer dogs named Hercules and Ajax, which she had purchased from a bankrupt security firm. Well, they didn't bother Hercules and Ajax for long. No need to go into details about feathers, fur and George's broken heart. (Eppel 29)

The two novels I focus on are set on the farms themselves. Graham Lang was born in Bulawayo, and went to Rhodes University as an art student (he wrote a somewhat scurrilous novel about that art department, *Clouds Like Black Dogs*—not about dogs at all). He emigrated to Australia and lectured in art at the University of Newcastle—as does the protagonist of his novel *Place of Birth*, Vaughn Bourke (as far as I know this is the only element of autobiography in the story). Bourke's brother Gus owns a farm; neighbours have been invaded and murdered, and Gus has summonsed Vaughn to help him exhume and relocate the bodies of their parents from their farm to a nearby town. They are joined by their sister Angela, a wildlife artist now resident in England. Vaughn's now outsider status allows him a certain sceptical distance from his brother's robust tenacity and violent racism; the novel is by no means a romanticised defence of white farming, and shows considerable insight into the complexities of the land-appropriation. Despite



Vaughn's timid left-wing ideology, he gets embroiled in the final invasion of their farm, with an inevitably bloody and fruitless finale. Like Holding's novel, *Place of Birth* ends in, and is narrated from the point of view of, a position of shocked defeat and rejection, almost of numbed incomprehension.

The intersection of human, animal and especially canine lives is made evident early on. Vaughn is met at the airport by his brother Gus and taken to the latter's town house in Bulawayo; his wife and two daughters have moved there after an earlier threat to the farm. They are greeted by Monty, "a sleepy-looking cross-mastiff [who] comes strolling up from behind the house, grinning amiably", characterised by Gus as "our slightly less-than-zealous watchdog" (Lang 8). Monty adores Gus, despite being treated with some disdain. He is only galvanised into action by the presence of meat on a braai—one of many indications of the unexamined industry of meat-production. Eventually Gus tosses the "old pal" (10) a chop, "which he catches with an agile snap of the jaws. 'Go on, bugger off, you parasite!' Gus chuckles, waving Monty away" (12). If Monty is a parody of the savage guard-dogs noted by Cauter, he is also a way of delineating Gus's inherent violence, demeanour of disdainful superiority, livelihood (ranching) and work-ethic. In the background hangs, literally, another animal presence: Angela's wild-life paintings on almost every wall. Hers is an ambivalent enterprise, both appreciative and exploitative, and somewhat scorned for its touristic kitchiness by the self-proclaimed avant-garde abstractionist Vaughn (though by his own admission he is a rubbish artist, and ironically he will end up benefiting from Angela's art rather than his own). In the underpinning moral economy of the novel's world, these animal dimensions—livestock-for-meat, wildlife-for-tourists, dogs-for-safety—exist in complex co-determinacy.

The novel moves out to the farm, ironically named Hopelands, whose typically fenced-in homestead survives only by virtue of an *ad hoc* deal Gus has fashioned with a retired policeman named Ncube. They are tenuously holding off the attentions of an invading war vet named Mtunzi, and are guarded by two other dogs, Frik and Tiny. The dogs give Vaughn a "cursory sniffing-over" on his arrival: "Rhodesian Ridgebacks are not famous for their intelligence, and these two oafs are no exception [...] Frik, in particular, seems given to boorish posturing and unnecessary noise" (33)—not unlike Gus, in Vaughn's portrayal. Nevertheless, these two stand in robust contrast to the "scrawny [...] yapping" dog inhabiting a kraal nearby, occupied by two old African servants, Joseph and Anna (38). The latter animal does not reappear until very late in the novel, whereas Frik and Tiny are ever-present, guarding hysterically, being fed (with meat, inevitably), accompanying Gus as he drives around such lands as he still controls. (His distress at stolen fencing, burned grazing, and cut-down old gum trees closely echoes that of Cathy Buckle, a likely source for a number of details). In the house, the dogs "lie on the floor next to Gus, gazing at him with besotted eyes" (49); if their devotion

counterpoints Vaughn's more jaundiced view of his brother, it also softens that portrayal to a degree. At the same time, the dogs themselves are, in a minor way, humanised or personalised, preparing us for the emotional shock of the novel's ending.

Mtunzi and his thugs eventually attack the farmhouse and its surrounds again. Gus is missing; Vaughn and Angela investigate. Among the first casualties are the servants Joseph and Anna, their scrappy little compound burned, a donkey hacked to death with axes, goats driven off, and the "thin" yapping dog killed (255, 273). Frik and Tiny remain at the house, loyal and vulnerable, "whining", launching a "senseless tirade", pointlessly flushing a stray chicken. They have not been fed; Vaughn finds some left-over chops, which they "wolf" down (254). As the final assault by the invaders unfolds, Vaughn tries to get the dogs into his vehicle, but they will not go: they are two "shabby knights of the realm", "oafish" and "mighty pleased with themselves"; they "will not leave their posts and they will heed only the call of duty" (262). If this is intended as a reflection of the wilful stubbornness of so many white farmers themselves, exemplified by Gus, it can only have one outcome. Vaughn's attempt to escape is thwarted: Angela is killed, Vaughn dragged back to the house. He witnesses the "snarling and barking" Frik being shot, then Tiny "gut-shot, spinning around in circles". Vaughn is tied up and beaten; in parallel, Tiny suffers, periodically crying and whimpering, fading to a "low whine" (265–7). We are not told, but presumably—unlike Vaughn—Tiny does not survive.

In not over-sentimentalising that death, Lang treads a narrow line between acknowledging animal suffering and dismissing it as comparatively irrelevant. It is difficult not to feel, though, that while the novel, through various conversations and inner thoughts of the focaliser Vaughn, recognises many of the arguments against the historic modes of white agricultural ownership and farmers' behaviour, the dogs are in their way innocent, both ciphers and victims of their masters' ideological entrapment and blinkeredness, ring-fenced as it were by stubborn cultural loyalties.

Lang's *Place of Birth*, for all its hedging against ideological monofocalism, borders on suggesting that cruelty against "innocent victims" is a 'cultural phenomenon' confined to black people—even Joseph and Anna's thin dog cannot be said to have been pampered, unlike Monty, Frik and Tiny. Empirically, this is hard to refute, as Buckle's *Innocent Victims*, and others' animal-welfare experience, testifies. But it is at worst an ethical tendency, not a rule. At one point in *Place of Birth*, the ex-policeman Ncube mentions a friend selling bull terrier puppies, and asks Gus if he would like one (Lang 72). There is no indication whether or not those dogs are being well-treated beyond what might be necessary for a commercial transaction, but it blurs those cultural prejudgements to a degree.

So, too, does the portrayal of dogs in Holding's *Unfeeling*, in which the animal presence is even more pervasive. While Lang projects critique and alternative viewpoints through a cynical focaliser and his conversations, within a strictly linear first-person narrative, Holding emplots uncertainty and white ideological lostness more through a shattered, back-and-forth, sometimes confusing fragmentation of narrative and separate focalisers. In the opening pages one learns of the crucial event, in fact the chronological end-point of the narrative. Teenaged Davey has survived a farm attack in which his parents are killed; he happened to be hiding in the ceiling with his father's shotgun after using it illicitly for a hunt, and escapes. The farmhouse is occupied by the obligatory fat woman (described in grossly animal terms, as in Eppel's novel). After a period with his aunt Marsha and uncle Mike on a neighbouring farm, and having returned to school, Davey conceives a plan to revisit the farm Edenfields, retrieve the concealed shotgun, and kill the woman. (More on this later.)

Dogs take their place within an envelope of mingled compassion and cruelty towards various other animals: some succoured, some eaten, some hunted. In the chronologically earliest event in the novel, Davey sneaks out of the house with the shotgun and their two dogs to hunt guinea-fowl. The dogs join him "ecstatically", and he indulges them at first, but then sends them home "because they'll disturb the game" (81). (While this kind of hunting of wildlife is condoned on one's 'own' property, Africans doing much the same, with their own dogs, is classified as 'poaching', and condemned accordingly (see also Rogers 130–3).) After a futile wait, he accidentally flushes some small "brown mammal", which he shoots at but fails to bring down (85). The animal turns out to be a duiker which is later found, wounded, by farm workers and brought to Marsha for treatment (180). But this is after the murder of Davey's parents, and Marsha cannot face its eyes' "shimmer of mortality" (47). Nor, later, can Davey himself. This can be read as a kind of uncanny 'return of the repressed': damage done to the vulnerable or the oppressed is bound to come back to haunt the perpetrator. Holding explicitly links the farmers' plight with that of the fawn: "The massacre at Edenfields stunned and pulverised [Marsha], rendering her abilities sterile [...] now she is filled with remorse. [...] Or she's been absolved of it. Either way the buck was taken and deposited in an empty pen and she had tried her best to forget about it [...] perhaps this is how it's got to be" (47–8). What is interesting here is the tension between being absolved and succumbing to events or fate; loss of ownership is allied to a recognition of mortality, a recognition that generates sterility—the loss of political power, belonging and ownership entails the loss of the power of motherhood itself.

Davey, in his "stony grief" and "blurry aimlessness", wants to kill the fawn (218); and he also kills a rabbit at school (60). This lays the grounds for killing a human; as he contemplates shooting the fat woman lying on his mother's bed,

apparently sound asleep, he thinks: "[H]e's been a killer, too, for most of [his life], slaying bucks and boars, skinning them, slicing and delving, into their bellies to bring out the liver, spleen, kidneys. He would rather have spared the lives of all those animals just to take hers, to experience again the ecstasy of a first kill, the thrill of taking life" (240). But he cannot, because the woman is already dead, of unknown causes. He does shoot into her, but he has been denied any satisfaction—in some ways the condition of whiteness in the postcolony more broadly. In complex ways, not entirely worked through in the novel, animals function both as quotidian realities and symbolic refractors of political possibilities and psychological states.

Dogs are solace and company throughout this time of multispecies distress. At his aunt and uncle's, an "almost manic" Davey "tore around, ate ferociously, ran amok with the dogs" (13; see also 86, 95, 97). They are "boisterous Staffies" with whom he fills time by throwing a "flat, gnawed rugby ball" (35; all sorts of cultural resonances there) as if he's "a boy doing manly things for the first time" (103). Not all folk treat their dogs in quite the same way. At one point in his phantasmagoric, Dante-esque journey towards exacting his revenge, Davey encounters a rough, drunk but hospitable man named Garth, and his dog Jinx. Jinx is a friendly and slobbery "brinjal-coloured terrier" whom Garth rules by shouting and threat, but who is also allowed to lick meaty residues off the people's plates. This unruliness seems part and parcel of Garth's somewhat impoverished and dishevelled lifestyle: he contrasts himself with the farmers, and in his foul-mouthed way is critical of the farmers' privileged position in the country: "Don't tell me they don't fucking understand that one day it's all going to be pulled away from under their feet" (143).

When Davey emerges from the murder of his parents, it is not of them he first tells his aunt: "They've killed the dogs. Auntie Marsha, they've killed the dogs" (46). Dogs function here as deflectors, as a psychological substitute, but also as a trigger for the perception of true tragedy—the death of the innocent. Is this a denial, too, of the possible culpability of his parents in their own fate—Garth's view—as well as a subconscious transference of something he cannot yet face? The reaction speaks of both the affection held for the dogs, as well as their subordination and instrumentalisation.

Ironically, the invaders are not the only killers of the eight dogs of Edenfields. The dogs are the first things to confront Mike when he explores the aftermath of the attack—a "carnage of dogs", hacked up but not all dead, some whimpering. Most disturbingly, in the bedroom he finds one dog licking at the body of Joe, Davey's father: The first thing he registers is disgust at the dog licking from the split scalp down to the lower back. [...] The blood drenches the carpet, drips from the cream bedspread, its rich smell thick in the stuffy room.

The dog still sits, licking and licking with its pink wet tongue at the wet pink flesh. Mike moves forward quickly, and with all the energy and anger he can muster, violently kicks it away. It yelps as it goes flying into the corner. When it tries

to stand, confused, he sees its rump and hind shank have been hacked at badly. It hobbles forward, back towards the meat of his master, slave to the scent of blood. With his foot he pushes it whining and growling out into the passage and shoots it in the neck. Dark dog blood splatters the light cream walls. The tremor falls to silence. (64)

Mike then, almost for lack of anything else to do, extends this ambivalent gesture of fury and mercy to the other injured dogs. "At least this is a way to end some misery. [...] He somehow knows he needs to account for them all. [...] In the end there are bits of shot-up dog everywhere. [...] Eventually he stops, drenched in the sight of blood and flesh, knowing that it'll be stamped into his consciousness, shape his thoughts, for ever" (65–6). Human and dog deaths meld into one traumatic memory, for which (he mulls) not even his call-ups during the guerrilla war could have prepared him. Marsha too feels they have now confronted a "demon that will follow them from now on, drag at their heels like a stubborn dog" (104). It could be history itself. Infuriatingly, illogically, when a policeman does eventually arrive, it is the dead dogs on which he focuses, accusing Mike of killing them against the law. This is an incident taken, probably, from Buckle; it exemplifies the weird conjunction, familiar to many Zimbabweans, of a sometimes devotional, sometimes manipulative, sticking to the letter of the law at certain levels of society, and a cavalier, equally manipulative disregard at others.

In several ways, then, what the novel displays, even as it attempts to psychologically defuse it, is helplessness in the face of chaos, when law and predictability are disabled. The dogs are the primary signifiers of that helplessness.

Just as I was formulating the conclusion to this paper, Robert Mugabe was persuaded by a largely bloodless military coup to resign as Zimbabwe's president after 37 years in power. In the coup's wake, an issue of the Al Jazeera programme "The Listening Post" reviewed media coverage of the Mugabe years. Amongst the programme's images from that time was one of a dead dog slumped on the front steps of a farmhouse, its erstwhile home. Both before and shortly after the coup, senior war veterans and government officials were suggesting that white farmers be invited back to help rescue the tattered agricultural sector and/or be compensated for their losses. Is that dog's death then not doubly pointless?

This article's aim to exhume the voice of the dog from these texts has its limits, some of them inherent to the texts themselves. Whilst the ever-present dogs are depicted as fulfilling a wide variety of roles—companions, guards, ciphers of defensiveness and victimisation—they are not regarded as having particular agency. They are figured thus in conflict zones everywhere: how often, in the ubiquitous newsreel footage of riots, protests and raids, from Palestine to the Ukraine, from Damascus to Santiago, does one spot a loose dog running about, excitable or scared? Unlike the heroic police or bomb-sniffing dogs, or the occasional rescued animal, these dogs escape media comment, or naming, a provenance or a future.

We still have some way to go before the canine presence in the conflict scenario, and more widely in the multispecies ecology, is adequately acknowledged and imagined.

## NOTES

1. The government-sponsored appropriation of white farms has been variously termed farm invasions, land grab, Third Chimurenga, or Fast Track Land Reform Programme, depending on stage, speaker and political allegiance. Modes ranged from extremely violent and unregulated to peaceful and legalistic. I use here the relatively neutral term "land-appropriation".

## WORKS CITED

- Adams, Carol. *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Continuum, 2000.
- Ahuja, Neel. "Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World." *PMLA* vol. 124, no. 2, 2009, pp. 56–63.
- Armstrong, Philip. "The Postcolonial Animal." *Society and Animals* vol. 10, no. 3, 2013, pp. 412–9.
- Buckle, Catherine. *African Tears*. Covos Day, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Beyond Tears*. Jonathan Ball, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Innocent Victims*. E-book. Adobe Digital Editions, 2004.
- Caute, David. *Under the Skin: The death of white Rhodesia*. Penguin, 1983.
- Cordiero-Rodrigues, Luis & Les Mitchell, eds. *Animals, Race and Multiculturalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Eppel, John. *Absent: The English Teacher*. Weaver, 2009.
- Fuller, Alexandra. *Let's Not Go to the Dogs Tonight*. Picador, 2002.
- Hanlon, Joseph, Jeanette Manjengwa & Teresa Smart. *Zimbabwe Takes Back its Land*. Jacana, 2013.
- Hoba, Lawrence. *The Trek and Other Stories*. Weaver, 2009.
- Holding, Ian. *Unfeeling*. Scribner, 2005.
- Lamb, Christina. *House of Stone*. Harper, 2006.
- Lang, Graham. *Place of Birth*. Jonathan Ball, 2006.
- Liebenberg, Lauren. *The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam*. Virago, 2008.
- Miller, John. *Empire and the Animal Body*. Anthem, 2014.
- Rogers, Douglas. *The Last Resort*. Jonathan Ball, 2009.
- Scoones, Ian et al. *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and realities*. James Currey, 2010.
- Slovic, Scott, S. Rangarajan & V. Sarveswaran, eds. *Ecoambiguity, Community and Development; Towards a politicized ecocriticism*. Lexington, 2014.
- St John, Lauren. *Rainbow's End*. Hamish Hamilton, 2007.
- Van der Post, Laurens. *A Story Like the Wind*. Penguin, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Far-Off Place*. Penguin, 1974.
- Wolmer, William. *From Wilderness Vision to Farm Invasions*. James Currey, 2007.